

January 2009

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Recommended Citation

Pearson, Mildred M. Dr. and Thomas, Krishna, "Promoting the Wholesome Professor: Building, Sustaining and Assessing Faculty" (2009). *Faculty Research and Creative Activity*. 22.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/eemedu_fac/22

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Promoting the Wholesome Professor: Building, Sustaining, and Assessing Faculty

Mildred Pearson and Krishna Thomas

Introduction

Have we accomplished our mission in the academy? Our mission should be the development of faculty members at various stages in their careers. Eastern Illinois University (EIU) has taken concrete steps toward building, sustaining, and retaining faculty, adopting the motto "Promoting the wholesome professor while providing teaching, research, and service." This framework provides a holistic model for our teaching and learning workshops to build our campus community. Given the dynamic acceleration of change within the academy and those navigating its course, it was necessary to find ways for faculty in which the university could address both personal and professional development.

Depending on one's institution, the obligations and responsibilities for teaching, research, and service can produce enormous stress in the life of the professor. Huber asserts that balance is a "blessing that many faculty seek in their professional lives, but it is one that few believe that they can achieve without serious risk to the advancement of their careers" (2001, 21). Faculty development offices or centers must become safe, nurturing places where not only intellectual conversations and dialogue can take place, but where human values, rewards, respect for hard work, and commitment to the institution are valued and appreciated.

History of Motto and Rationale

In a society with ever increasing demands, where faculty members are juggling family and work in an attempt to find balance, many suffer from burnout. "Faculty burnout is not an individual problem, but an organizational problem, that requires both the individual and organization to remedy (Mintz 2002, 3). Mintz has suggested that faculty development, in its truest sense, must be holistic and integrative of all the needs and activities of the individual faculty member, and, what is more, must recognize that these needs encompass, to use another value-laden binary distinction, both the intellect and emotions (2).

In 2005, as EIU began to review its existing programs, it realized in order to be successful in preparing faculty and staff for the demanding environment, there was a critical need to discuss ways to address promoting and appreciating faculty members in all areas of their lives. Under the leadership of Mildred M. Pearson, the Office of Faculty Development and the Faculty Development Advisory Committee adopted the motto "Promoting the wholesome professor, while providing teaching, research, and service." A "wholesome professor" is one who is physically fit, mentally ready, emotionally healthy, scholarly, and socially engaged. The goal was to encourage collaboration and involvement outside departments, to promote social engagement outside the classroom, and to encourage faculty members to meet across disciplines to decrease isolation.

Building Faculty

EIU's faculty development, curriculum, and programming centers around the "wholesome professor" motto and its strands, and we launched an academic calendar around this holistic model. The programs and workshops put into place at EIU focused on taking full advantage of the tremendous opportunity to not only affect students, but also to create a supportive learning environment that inspires faculty members to strengthen their view of connectedness with each other and the campus. Workshops are offered under each strand to demonstrate to our faculty members that their personal development is as important as their professional development.

A nurturing environment is created during the new faculty orientation with a welcome address and the expression "You are EIU." The director emphasizes the importance of joining a campus where "voices are heard, views are valued, vocation is appreciated, and victories are celebrated." The start of the academic year is a promising time, especially for incoming faculty members at the new faculty orientation, seminar, and the academic Thriving Through Teamwork Fair (TTT), which highlights the teaching vision and the core values of EIU. Mentors facilitate learning by leading, nurturing, modeling strategies, and problem solving. They serve as facilitators, advisers, and coaches, providing support and encouragement, which is essential. Furthermore, new faculty have a unique opportunity to connect with existing faculty in the Faculty Mentoring Circles Connection program, which provides a wide range of mentoring assistance, including advice, social support, information, coaching, and friendship. We provide the assistance needed by involving the entire campus community

and the larger business community in our efforts. The Partners in Action program is a faculty development initiative to work with the Charleston Chamber of Commerce and local area businesses to provide coupons and savings for new faculty members. In the 2007–2008 academic year, \$31,463 was raised as the estimated value of donated goods and services, while \$40,9430 was raised the following year.

We continue to build faculty by providing teaching and learning workshops centered around the “wholesome professor” motto to augment faculty teaching. The number of participants in wholesome professor workshops has increased from 153 (2005–2006) and 126 (2006–2007) to 222 (2007–2008) and was at 101 for the fall 2008 semester (2008–2009).

We also welcomed nationally acclaimed speakers to our campus to bring best practices from both national and institutional perspectives, ranging from critical thinking, to groups and academic games, assessment of grading and writing, race relations, work-life balance, and learning through inquiry. The following speakers have presented at EIU: Marilla Sviniki (attendance: 29), Barbara Millis (attendance: 90), Linda Nilson (attendance: 66), Tim Wise (attendance: 526), Craig Nelson (attendance: 62), Susan Robison (attendance: 70), Virginia Lee (attendance: 77), and Sandra McGuire (attendance: 140). Barbara Walvoord is scheduled to speak in April 2009.

Sustaining Faculty

Faculty development is always most effective when it becomes an organic part of an institution, part of the institutional fabric, and fosters a revitalized spirit of collegiality and community. More important, the synergistic approach helps create an environment of hope and opportunity, the kind of environment in which scholarship has the best chance of thriving, a living, nurturing environment that lifts the spirits, engenders hope, encourages and supports risk-taking and innovation, and inculcates a spirit of cooperation and collaboration (Zahorski 2002). Research validates that support is needed, and the desire to work with colleagues in and out of their departments is essential. In fact, networking and collaborating are the primary benefits attributed to faculty development (Akerlind and Quilan 2001; Austin 1992; Cox 2001; Eble and McKeachie 1985). Therefore, mentoring programs are encouraged and strongly recommended.

At EIU, a formal mentoring program has been established to ensure that the purpose of the program is followed. Mentors and mentees are paired at the beginning of the year; relationships are organized across colleges. EIU also has included junior faculty who can provide assistance to those who are working on terming degrees. As Stanley and Lincoln have put it, “Mentoring is a part of the institutional citizenship responsibilities of every senior faculty member, not a form of overload (2005, 48). Not only are mentoring programs important for retention and sustainability, but they also lead to more productive faculty. The Veteran Faculty Circles is another initiative that aims to re-engage, reinvigorate, and re-ignite senior faculty through dialogue and shared experiences.

Assessing Faculty

A needs assessment survey, to make recommendations to the provost and to serve as an integral part of future planning, is conducted biannually. Our most recent survey results show that the majority of the respondents were tenured full professors and the average length of service was 9.7 years. The top three goals noted as most important were maintaining in-depth knowledge and expertise in their field of specialization, improving skills as an effective teacher, and improving skills in methods and techniques related to research and creative activity.

New faculty orientation highlights both the teaching vision and the core values of EIU. The number of new faculty members attending orientation has ranged from thirty-six in 2005, forty-one in 2006, and fifty-one in 2007 to forty-four in 2008. Program assessments show that the mean feedback score was between four and five on a five-point scale for three years in a row. At the 2008 new faculty orientation, we revamped the programming to include concurrent sessions. Of these sessions, the most highly ranked were sessions on rubrics and using response systems in the classroom. During the 2008 Academic Thriving through Teamwork Fair, we had 113 participants and showcased the various colleges and different constituents on campus. We have also instituted a new faculty wine and cheese reception, where attendance for the past four years has consistently exceeded one hundred people.

Finally, our faculty appreciation day is an annual event designed to celebrate our faculty members and their family members. The past four years have seen a tremendous increase, from 321 in 2005, to 401 in 2006, to 500 in 2007, and 588 in 2008. In sum, faculty development has grown to reach 1,159 attendees to all faculty development activities during the fall 2008 semester.

Conclusion

Building, sustaining, and assessing faculty using a holistic approach can be challenging, especially when we think in terms of teaching, research, and service to the institution and the community. However, at Eastern Illinois University, the goal of faculty development is to bridge the gap between personal and professional development. There is a paradigm shift to bring learning, and not just teaching, to the forefront of wholesome professor workshops, offering faculty members the opportunity to answer the question of how who they are relates to their vocation and what they teach relates to those they serve.

Although faculty development in its essential form may look different on every campus, it needs to foster the values of the community it serves and bring to its members the fullness we feel when we are respected and acknowledged for our work and convinced that what we do is worthwhile. Boyer asserts that the richness of talent should be celebrated, not restricted, and only as the distinctiveness of each professor is affirmed will the potential of scholarship be fully realized. Such a mosaic of talent, he says, if acknowledged, will bring renewed vitality to higher learning and the nation (Boyer 1990, 27).

At Eastern Illinois University, our desire to be a relationship-driven campus directly impacts the life and purpose of the institution, and for our faculty there is a sense of community and connectedness that builds from knowing who we are and our purpose in being here. Beyond a doubt, faculty development draws from Eastern's own motto that "I am EIU" to overcome fragmentation and isolation and build a sense of "meaning-making." Albert Einstein is widely quoted as saying that "only a life lived in the service of others is worth living." Our mission is accomplished as we continue to strive to provide meaning for ourselves in the academy and in the lives of those we serve—one student, one staff member, and one faculty member at a time.

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